

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO TRAIN UP CHILDREN?

Each successive age finds our country dominated by a leading idea or, rather, by a pair of opposed ideas which, with much confusion of battle, work out character on distinctive lines. Just now 'imperial thinking', on the one hand, & 'individual rights', on the other, are these moving ideas. If we range ourselves on the side of the 'imperial thinking' section, a great impetus, almost the impetus of a new career, is given to parents, for what more worthy thing can men & women do than bring up families of service to the State! The question of training a single family becomes of imperial importance; & that is not a slight thing, for it is well for us all to recognise that we are active parts of a great whole. But there is a nebulous cloud of ideas afloat as to the best way of bringing up children, & the question of the 'best way' is likely to provoke much discussion.

As for the physical care of children, we are fairly agreed, in theory at any rate, excepting always the few who follow after fads. Children should have a plentiful, wholesome, varied & simple diet, avoiding tinned meats, spices, sauces & all highly-flavoured foods. They should wear durable, simple, loosely-cut, garments, (an out-of-door garment of Ruskin cloth, for example, for girls), should have as much air & exercise as can be rightly contrived, should not plod over their books in the evening & should get up in time to wash & dress carefully, say their prayers, do any little duties that fall to them & eat a good unhurried breakfast before they set off for school. Most persons will accept all this as part of what we mean by good bringing-up.

But children are persons. From the moment they begin to express themselves at all we know that they have ways of their own & that we have to deal somehow with what is, in fact, a contending force. Some parents are so happy that, from the very beginning, their children are their stanch allies; while the history of other families is one of continual dissension & contention. Now the question is, must parents go on in a happy-go-lucky way sliding over or blundering against each difficulty as it turns up, or, is there

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"WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO TRAIN UP A CHILD?"

(Educational Socialism)

A child is an amazingly important possession, & everyone knows this so well that it is unnecessary to go into the commonplaces of child-training. We are still apt, however, to make mistakes as to what a child is & what we must do for him. To begin with, we do not realise that he is born a Person; that, so soon as he gets any means of expression, he shows himself to be a person of great & tender affections, of clear & logical thought, vivid imagination, of many activities & with an eager desire for knowledge. He differs from his ~~father~~ elders chiefly in his feebleness, his ignorance, & his very limited means of self-expression; it is in regard to these that his education should help him. What we call his 'faculties' are more acute than ours & we need not trouble ourselves about developing them. Again, we talk of 'the child' as if he were 'something between a wax doll & an angel', quite good & lovely; but sensible parents know that their child is a person like themselves with capacities & tendencies towards both good & evil & that their business is to cherish the good & frustrate the evil. They do not laugh & say, - 'oh, its human nature!' when a child is greedy, jealous & cruel because they know that when he is loving & lovely in his behaviour that is also human nature & is the side of his nature they must foster. They know, too, this is to be done by assiduous care from the first in the forming of good habits. It is worth remembering, too, that there is such a thing as a vulgar infant - the child who has been laughed at, teased, indulged, & caused to show off from the moment of his first consciousness; & there are also infants who manifest the sweet dignity & reserve proper to them as persons, a propriety of behaviour upon which their parents have not presumed to encroach.

A child wants, as everybody knows, air, sunshine, exercise, sleep, & nourishment. It is only necessary to speak of the last. Many children, especially in families of the lower middle class, are insufficiently nourished. Highly respectable & worthy parents, in their anxiety to keep up appearances, study unconsciously, upon how little food they & their children can support life. They dress becomingly & rather smartly, live in a house of some pretensions, & do not perceive that they are getting themselves & their children into the habit of 'not much appetite', a habit which results in hollow cheeks, meagre form, & dull intelligence in middle life.

Parents of this sort show qualities deserving of all honour. They loathe the highly-flavoured messes, the perpetual concern about food, shown by neighbours of theirs who live to eat; & they end by not attaching enough importance to a wholesome, well-cooked & abundant mixed-diet. It is a question of income, no doubt, but a narrow income may be wisely spent. Furniture may be spare, simple & pleasing; fashion may be eschewed in clothes, & durable materials, cut in the loose & simple way that artists love, will save both appearances & pence. It is a praiseworthy service to the nation to send a child into the world with good physique.

What we call a child's education begins quite early. We need not trouble ourselves about developing his 'faculties': There they are, keen, & very much on the alert. What he wants is nourishment, intellectual, as well as physical & we all know how insatiable is the knowledge-hunger of a little child. 'Whit wy', says Wee Macgregor, & 'Whit wy', says every child: & it behoves parents to tell all they know or can find out. Few children at five fail to make their parents feel the need of a good Encyclopedia to be translated as fathers & mothers best know how into the language of the small people. None affords great opportunities of learning, doing & becoming, & perhaps children should not go to school until they are six. Before the school age, parents should ask them selves seriously what they expect of the school & what they understand by education.

Children are, for the most part, good & intelligent; teachers are, for the most part, able & devoted, & education is, for the most part, ----- futile.

We are told that the best scholars from Elementary Schools do not find favour with employers. They lack initiative, power of attention & devotion to duty. Neither are their own lives enriched by their education; they do not become keen observers, eager readers, clever craftsmen; & the same complaints are made about young people all the way up the social scale. Yet it is rather the exception than the rule for boys & girls to do badly at school. They are sharp, alert, get marks, take places, pass examinations, win scholarships, fulfil what appears to be the whole duty of school-boy. Indeed almost any school is a delightful place to go into, so keen are the scholars & so brilliant is the teaching.

But, with all this zeal, the educational output is commonly poor stuff. Now & then we get specimens of the children's essays & letters published in one & another of the Reviews. - the best of the sort probably or they would not be made public. These literary efforts would hardly do credit to a nation of imbeciles & are an iniquitously inadequate result of the labour & care bestowed on the education of children with brains.

Here, again, insufficient nourishment appears to be the cause of failure. We stint children, if not of bread & butter, then of intellectual pabulum. Children who go to school, hungry for knowledge, get the diluted stuff of the oral lesson or the sawdust of the text-book or Reader; their minds refuse to assimilate stuff which is pithless & feeble; lesson^s become knowledge only through the act of assimilation, the digestive process of the mind. Parents are a good deal to blame for the fact that the teacher comes to regard himself as a sort of conduit through which all knowledge (duly peptonised) must be passed into that vacant & inactive receptacle—the mind of a child! Parents demand prizes & places & examinations to assure them of their children's standing & progress. But these tests prove nothing but that a boy's emulation & ambition are being played upon at the cost of that desire for & delight in knowledge for its own sake which is nature's provision for our intellectual growth.

In another respect parents of all classes err. They are parsimonious about books. While ready enough to spend upon bat or hockey stick, they begrudge the price of each new book a child brings home;—a parsimony very much on a level with that which grudges bread & butter, for, as the body grows on the one so does the mind on the other.

A boy or girl of fourteen or fifteen should have read in school-hours at least a hundred volumes, books that are worth while, books that any intelligent person would be glad to read, (eliminating readers, abridgements, epitomes, extracts, & the like); should be neat & exact at various handicrafts, should be able to use pencil or brush as a means of expression, & should have some real intimacy with a wide range of natural objects & phenomena. As for tests, he might be required to read, once, for the first time, a chapter in one of the Waverley Novels & reproduce it, either orally or in writing, in vigorous, fluent, English; or he might record all the observations on natural objects he had made on his way to school, or sing or play a few bars at sight, & so on.

The method of this sort of work is reading & observation; the teacher is released from the hodman's labour of getting the 'beggary elements' of education into unwilling minds & is free for his proper & higher office, that of directing, inspiring, stimulating.

As for the material of such education, all great thinkers from Plato downwards are agreed that the knowledge of God is the chief knowledge; & though this is a by-issue, no other literature is so effective in forming a good style as that of the Bible. After the knowledge of God, no doubt, comes the knowledge of man, to be got through history, literature, & also

through teachings as to conduct arising out of an ordered knowledge of human nature. Next should come a knowledge of nature & some elementary knowledge of the various branches of science that help to this knowledge. All humanistic & nature teaching should increase.

Joy in living; a fuller life with more power, more joy, keener interests, is indeed, a chief end of education.

It is unnecessary to say anything about Arithmetic, or Mathematics as a whole, except to rejoice in the action taken by the Board of Education towards minimising the labour bestowed upon this fetish of the Schools. Of course Arithmetic is necessary & taught with intelligence, should be one means (by no means the only means) of inciting to logical thought. The young student who shows any initiative in this direction should be encouraged by all means, for him may be the pure joy of the higher mathematics. But the mere mechanical plodding through rules & examples is not of any great educational value & consumes time that might be better used. As for languages, 'Latin is so satisfying', said a beginner; & French, at any rate, so necessary.

We need not fear that hate noir - a crowded curriculum. Give children living books, & they do the work in a third of the time the oral lesson demands, & do it with perfect accuracy & comprehension; they, like their elders, enjoy a crowded hour of glorious living; it is staleness & flatness that palls upon them. Besides, this sort of work gives them leisure for hobbies; ~~they need do no home-work or evening study~~.

Children taught in this way upon Books & Things acquire great power of attention as well as power of expression whether with brush or pen or oral speech. They prove the truth of Bacon's axiom that 'Studies are for delight' & they become resourceful, capable, persons, able to act upon their own initiative.

What we want is a common Curriculum for schools of all classes for children up to the age of fourteen or fifteen.

Every child has a right to a living education & to as much of it as he can take; & it is only through the demands of a common curriculum that we shall attain that golden rule that Comenius was in search of, -

"WHEREBY TEACHERS SHALL TEACH LESS & SCHOLARS SHALL LEARN MORE"

*Just the motto
in all a teacher's life*